

Strokes Most Frequent Of All Brain Diseases

By Victor Cohn
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A "cerebral vascular accident"—the illness that William O. Douglas apparently has suffered—is in popular language a "stroke."

It means that a blood vessel in, or in some cases leading to, the brain has burst, or has become clogged or clotted.

As a result, some brain cells, suddenly cut off from their oxygen supply, die.

The condition, once commonly called "apoplexy" or "a striking down," is the most frequent of brain diseases. It is so common that some evidence of past strokes, often without symptoms, is found in 25 per cent of all autopsies.

The immediate effects of loss of some brain cells may include some degree of paralysis—sometimes paralysis of a whole side of the body (the side opposite to the part of the brain that has been affected), sometimes paralysis of the face, an arm or a leg. The effects may also include loss of ability to speak, loss or lessening of the sense of temperature, touch, pain and vision and varying degrees of mental impairment.

Any of these conditions may remain permanent to greater or lesser extents. Or they may disappear or be greatly alleviated, especially with retraining by experts in rehabilitation and neurology.

The person who has had a stroke remains in danger of a second one from the same basic cause, usually blood vessel damage or deterioration, as the first one. Most often, especially in older persons, the basic cause is arteriosclerosis—the "hardening" or gradual thickening and clogging of the arteries.

One patient may have a seriously paralyzing stroke, and recover to enjoy years of normal or nearly normal life. Another may seem to have a mild stroke, be "alert" and "comfortable" and have another more severe stroke within days.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, then 67, had a mild stroke on Nov. 25, 1957, during his second term. He was back on the job on Dec. 9, suffering only some mild speech impairment.

He wrote in 1965: "Even today I occasionally reverse

syllables in a long word and at times am compelled to speak slowly and cautiously if I am to enunciate clearly." He died of heart disease in March, 1969.

The great scientist, Louis Pasteur, did much of his most important work after he suffered a serious stroke in 1868, at age 45. He lived until age 72, though he retained some permanent paralysis of his left arm and leg.

Justice Douglas is 76, and since 1968 has had to have an electronic pacemaker inside his chest to keep his heart beating properly because of a chronic heart condition.

These are factors that count against him, said one neurologist not connected with his case.

"But Douglas always has been an unusually vigorous man who keeps himself in remarkable physical condition," this specialist added. "It's simply not possible to say whether he will or will not recover, or whether he will recover fully or partly, and it's especially impossible without knowing many details of his condition, which his physicians haven't told us."

It takes months, doctors report, to learn how much of a stroke's damage will or will not be permanent.

In one way this damage is often far less than it was just a few decades ago. In part because of techniques and attitudes developed during the paralytic polio epidemics of the 1940s and 1950s, efforts to rehabilitate stroke patients are far more expert and aggressive, at least in the best medical centers.

Dr. Howard Rusk, of New York, the most important figure in applying rehabilitation to the injured of World War II, has written of most treatment of strokes before the late 1940s: "The old wife's tale was that you had one stroke, and then you sat around waiting for a second one, or a third one, or however many it took to kill you. If you had any kind of brain injury affecting your locomotive functions, everyone assumed your life was finished."

Because of work done by Rusk and others, this is now far from true.